

Fifteen Years of Democracy in Bhutan : A Rural Perspective

Goembo

“Have you been invited into a group chat?” a young man asks his relative. “If not, you may soon be invited. Just join the group and you may stand a chance to win a monthly data recharge, selected through a lucky draw from among the group members managed by a political candidate.”

Come 2023, Bhutan will have successfully completed 15 years of democracy and voters will be going to the polls for the fourth parliamentary elections. Although elections are not due for at least a year from now, subtle politics are already beginning to take shape in the villages.

Most people in rural Bhutan do not have specific expectations from the elected governments. They say that three successive governments in the last 15 years have more or less confirmed what the people expected and consider Bhutan’s transition to democracy as being successful.

What Does Democracy Mean to Rural People?

After the initial apprehensions and fears about the ills of democracy that reportedly plagued other countries, the people are now more confident about the benefits for Bhutan. But most people in the villages see democracy as a mere process of electing a government every five years.

“I think casting my vote to elect a government is what democracy is all about,” said Pem Thinley, a farmer from Pemagatshel. He added that the role of the grassroot voters ends after the elections are over. Most people agree with his view that, after the elections, they have no role to play for another five years.

When asked what decides his vote, he immediately said that he looks for the capability and trustworthiness of a party president; it is more important than that of a constituency candidate.

People also said that they were not in touch with candidates who lost in the primary elections. “Forget about the representatives from the parties that lose primary elections coming to meet people,” says Sonam, another farmer. “We hardly meet our elected representatives between elections these days.”

Political Parties

Some may consider it good for our nascent democracy for political parties to be less distinctive in their political outlook, but 15 years of democracy have not enabled people to identify distinctive ideologies of the political parties. For the farmers, different political parties with different names share similarities. The differences between political parties are just in the names of the parties. This is the reason why farmers like Pem Thinley look at the leadership to decide his vote.

Only constant interactions between political parties and the grassroots electorate will enable people to identify differences between political parties based on their ideologies, according to Lepo, a former gup. He says elections will be fought based more on personal appeal of leaders than ideological differences for the foreseeable future, as long as the political process holds elections every five years.

One aspiring politician admitted that there is hardly any ideological distinction between the political parties, and that elections in the rural areas are more about the charm and charisma of party presidents than national issues. Local issues do matter but parties across the board offer incentives that are too similar for the people to be swayed by them.

Political parties need to be in constant touch with grassroots voters between the elections to remain relevant but people believe that parties across the board fail to involve the people after the elections. This lack of continuous involvement of people in the political process between the elections will make it harder for some parties to remain relevant after each election.

More Views

While the present two-party general election is working fine for a small country with democracy still in its infancy, some people feel that a multi-party system may encourage more divergent views in the parliament, through which political parties channel their alternative views.

A former civil servant argues that, in a multiparty parliament, even if one party manages to win just one seat, that seat represents the voice of not just that political party but the ideals of those people who have voted for that party. That one candidate, through his diligence, may determine the fate of that party in the next elections, which is otherwise not possible in a two-party parliament.

According to him, there is a sizeable percentage of the population who voted for those parties that could progress beyond the primary rounds and find no voice in the parliament.

The absence of other political parties in the parliament is considered a huge handicap for the opposition party during by-elections as the ruling party will always have political advantages in making promises and delivering them. This may be why five of the six by-elections held so far in the last 15 years were won by candidates of the ruling party, with four by-elections wrested by the ruling party from the opposition. This indicates the mismatch in the political fortunes between the ruling party and the opposition, while parties outside the parliament remain mere passive witnesses.

Local Government Elections Versus Parliamentary Elections

Compared with parliamentary elections, local government elections are increasingly becoming more keenly contested in the villages.

“While parliamentary elections are important, it is the local leaders who are important in bringing changes in the villages,” says Jamba, a farmer, with a wry smile. “Of course, local government elections are more important for people like us.”

Since elected local government leaders are required to get involved in virtually everything in the village, people look for leaders who are not only accessible at all times but are also proactive.

“One wrong elected leader at the helm and we have to wait five long years, which is an expensive wait,” said another farmer. It is because of this that most eligible voters converged on their villages during the last local government elections. “Some villages saw the election even getting a little unsavoury at times,” said a local businessman in Pemagatshel. Instead of

going to vote in person at the adjacent Zobel gewog, he and his family decided to vote through a facilitation booth in Shumar gewog, to avoid the ire of candidates and supporters of the other camp.

Mobilisation of supporters and lobbying were also quite intense during the last LG elections, with eligible voters all returning to their villages, bringing construction works to a standstill during the election period.

“I had a critical construction work that missed its deadline during the last elections because my labourers had to return to their respective villages on so many occasions in the run-up to the elections,” said a frustrated contractor, Tashi. He said that people back in the villages are beginning to take local elections more seriously than the parliamentary elections.

Party Leaders and Candidates

From a rural perspective, the party president is the most important factor in deciding the fate of a party. In the absence of ideological differences between the various political parties, the next elections will also largely be decided by the appeal of the party leaders and candidates in the respective constituencies.

A farmer was told that there may be a new party in the upcoming elections; he immediately asked who the party leader was. A party leader, according to him, should be someone with a proven track record as a leader of the masses, with great communication skills. But the most important traits he looked for in a party leader were honesty and integrity. Faces of party leaders are what identify most parties in the villages.

A leader who is humble and able to immerse himself in the masses, with a distinguished career, holds the key to winning people’s trust, according to a village elder. He pointed out the importance of choosing trustworthy party representatives or party workers to garner support at the grassroots.

Key Party Workers

According to some respected village elders, roping in trustworthy party workers played a crucial role in garnering support for any party. Political parties which failed to do this underperformed, even if they had strong candidates.

The ones who do not get along well in the community only alienate voters from that party, according to a former gup. The overall party leadership is also often misguided by such workers about the ground realities.

While debate rages over whether parties should be maintaining ground workers or not, people in the villages are divided over the issue. Those who are more informed about national politics feel that grassroots party workers are unnecessary. A majority of people who are less informed depend on information passed on by party workers from close quarters to make decisions.

Some believe that party workers ensure continuity of communication between elected representatives and voters. Others say that the presence of party workers, even after the election, creates unnecessary local power centres, leading to disharmony in the community. Some party workers and supporters were often accused of using their influence to serve their own interests in the past.

Despite the drawbacks, political party workers at the village level are an important tool for any party and their candidates to reach out to every potential voter. While doing away with party workers may not be good for the democratic process, allowing unlimited party supporters and workers gives an undue advantage to some. There is a need to ensure a level playing field for all parties when it comes to the number of workers.

Social Media

Social media play an important role in connecting people and potential candidates. Everyone understands their importance, and nearly all sections of society are increasingly making use of it. During the last LG elections, most aspiring local leaders were seen managing their groups through various social media platforms.

A gup who was elected said that, while social media groups do not necessarily convert into votes, social media offers an ideal platform to reach out to voters more effectively. The most popular social media platforms widely used in the villages are Wechat, Telegram, and Facebook.

Parliamentary candidates across political parties know this well and have already started using social media platforms to create groups and attract as many members as possible, using creative ideas. Given the difficulties in holding public meetings during the current pandemic, it is obvious that social media will play an even more important role in the next parliamentary elections.

With increasing use of social media, even by government agencies to send out important announcements, social media content is considered being influential enough to warrant attention. While using creative ideas to attract attention and connect with people on social media is good communication strategy, effective regulations may be necessary to prevent people from being misguided by wrong information.